

Statement of Chairman John Shimkus
Subcommittee on Environment
Hearing on “Perfluorinated Chemicals in the Environment: An Update on the
Response to Contamination and Challenges Presented”
September 6, 2018

(As prepared for delivery)

The Subcommittee will now come to order and I will recognize myself for 5 minutes for the purpose of offering an opening statement.

Good morning.

Today’s hearing focuses on a class of emerging environmental contaminants that are highly fluorinated chemicals. Technically known as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances – they are more commonly referred to by their acronym: PFAS. Many of us are familiar with these substances because of the work of our colleagues, Mr. Tonko, Mr. Upton, and Mr. Hudson, in their districts and states.

PFAS is a group of man-made chemicals, numbering in the thousands, that have been manufactured and used in a variety of industries around the globe. These chemicals have been used to make coatings and products that are widely used by consumers due to their oil and water repellent characteristics. Items containing PFAS include food packaging like pizza boxes and microwave popcorn bags, and in nonstick products like Teflon, as well as polishes, waxes, paints, and cleaning products. The chemicals also serve to make components of fire-fighting foams and mist suppressants for metal plating operations. The military used them in foam to extinguish explosive oil and fuel fires.

PFAS are considered emerging contaminants because today’s advanced analytical technology is increasingly detecting their presence in the environment and there isn’t a great deal of toxicology data on many of these substances – meaning we don’t know enough to say how risky each PFAS chemical is or what the exact impact of exposure to these substances will be for each person.

In truth, while we are only on the front end of understanding how they move in the environment or their effect on the environment and public health, what we do know is that because of their unique properties and vast usage, most people have come into contact with at least one PFAS.

In addition, studies on a few PFAS chemicals suggest those chemicals might cause health problems for humans. And, these PFAS chemicals appear to be very persistent in the environment and in the human body – meaning they don't break down.

In the past few years, public anxiety about PFAS detection and uncertainty about what to do about it has grown. News reports have highlighted several communities, near military bases or factories making PFAS, have discovered these chemicals in their drinking water.

This hearing is about starting the dialogue on PFAS. It means taking stock of what the government knows about PFAS, what efforts to contain its contamination have promise, and what is preventing people from being helped with cleanup, or avoid contamination of their air, soil, and water. It's time to figure out what can be done right now and what needs to be done to respond appropriately to legitimate risks created by PFAS contamination in the environment.

I understand that in 2016 EPA established health advisories for certain PFAS chemicals to provide drinking water system operators, and state, tribal and local officials with information on the health risks of these chemicals. In addition, in May of this year, EPA kicked off a national PFAS effort. We welcome back to the Committee, Dr. Grevatt – the unofficial “EPA PFAS Czar” who will walk us through EPA's ongoing as well as future plans for addressing PFAS.

We will also hear from the Department of Defense because the various branches of the military have often used these chemicals for fire suppression and now many military installations are faced with significant issues concerning PFAS contamination. We welcome Ms. Maureen Sullivan, the Department's Deputy Assistant Secretary for Environment who will walk us through what DoD is doing to tackle this issue.

For the critical state perspective, which represents the front lines for addressing the issue we will hear from our friends in the State drinking water and solid waste agencies. We welcome back Ms. Daniels who is here on behalf of the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators and Mr. Sandeep who is here on behalf of the Association of State and Territorial Solid Waste Management Officials.

Without stealing my colleagues from Michigan's thunder, I also want to welcome Ms. Issacs from Governor's Office in Lansing. She is the official Michigan PFAS Czarina and it will be good to understand her State's work in this area.

Last, but not least, we welcome back Mr. Olson from NRDC and extend a new welcome to Ms. Donovan from Clean Cape Fear who will, respectively, provide the perspective of national environmental advocates and a local community affected by contamination from PFAS chemicals known as GenX. Members of this committee should be familiar with EPA's work on this PFAS compound because of our work by Mr. Hudson.

I hope that this hearing will result in a productive dialogue that will allow the Subcommittee to better understand the challenges presented by these chemicals; the roles of Federal, State, and local officials and programs – like the Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund that we renewed on voice vote; and what the current response is and what may need to be done to improve what we are doing across the country.

Before closing, I want to acknowledge that my Democrat colleagues are seeking a hearing on implementation of reforms to title I of the Toxic Substances Control Act. While we could have foreseen that the new law would be litigated, we could not have expected the acrimony that has occurred so quickly about these provisions. Moreover, many of us were told to expect implementation of this law to go one way, only to see it play out quite the opposite. While our staff has been receiving briefings every few months, the uncertainty surrounding a political head in the chemicals' office has complicated a having a hearing. I promise my colleagues that I will see what can be done with the time available to us to look at this subject.

I now yield to my colleague from New York, our subcommittee Ranking Member, Mr. Tonko.